

Doing the product: An experiential task-based approach to inspire learners

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Having observed the success of certain challenging classroom tasks, such as performing a two-minute Shakespeare play or writing a letter of complaint, we wanted to explore the reasons behind learners' obvious engagement. We found that such tasks were product-oriented, communicative, meaning-focused, had a deadline, and catered to individual needs. Our enquiry led us to re-examine *deep end strategy*, a term coined by Johnson (1982) but first described by Brumfit (1979). This approach reverses traditional classroom procedure by putting communication first, so that *present – practice – produce* becomes *communication – presentation /drill – enhanced production*. It has similarities with task-based learning as well as the learning of other skills such as sports, singing or driving because learners start by *doing*.

The title of the workshop refers to the 'Just do it' Nike slogan, which encourages even novices to rise to the challenge of complex tasks. In language learning terms, it means the absence of input and pre-planning before executing a task with a finite aim. As Brumfit (1979) argues, too much initial focus on form is sterile because it treats language as a closed system divorced from the socio-cultural contexts it obviously refers to for meaning; too much deep end communication, on the other hand, can render the classroom redundant. Error correction and diagnosis of learner language needs are therefore central to the success of this approach.

We acknowledged more specific disadvantages of deep end strategy. Apart from Johnson's (1982) observations that it may not be for the novice teacher and requires 'a large resource bank' of materials (Johnson, 1982:198), deep end tasks could also lead to fossilisation (Johnson, 1992). In an attempt to deal with this issue, Johnson adopts a so-called 'tennis clinic strategy': the teacher sets the communicative goal; students plan their language needs; students learn by conferring individually with the teacher; and students communicate. (Johnson, 1992: 185).

Other suggestions include extended briefing and debriefing after task performance, but whatever strategy is adopted, we believe highlighting the failures or potential improvements in their language performance will ultimately lead students to better communication.

Two small-scale research studies exploring deep-end tasks with a low level foundation class were described. For the first intervention, it was noticed that, despite daily correction and explicit formal practice, learners continued to produce non-standard question forms. The first intervention, therefore, set up tasks in which the students would produce the forms spontaneously in more realistic settings. They (1) interviewed other students already on the course they aspired to join; (2) reported the results; and (3) produced a newsletter recounting the interviews. Two points emerged from the activities:

- the students produced a wider range of related structural forms than would otherwise be expected - see Table 1; and

- producing the illustrated newsletter in the time frame of 24 hours revealed sophisticated literacy and IT skills possessed by at least two of the students, a product designer and a computer support worker.

	Direct questions	Indirect questions	Reported questions complex sentences	Reported questions simple sentences	Indirect reported speech	Direct reported speech
Brainstorming	8					
Interview	6 (4)	1 (2)				
Presentation			(1)	1	1 (1)	(1)
Newsletter			(1)	1	(1)	

Table 1: Occurrence of question forms and reported speech in deep end task series (non-standard forms in brackets)

For the second study, learners watched a video of half an authentic lecture on the UK jury system. No language input was provided and learners answered comprehension questions based on their lecture notes. This activity was also ‘deep-end’ because there was no language grading and students were involved in a real world listening task rather than the typically limited classroom listening. Participants answered questionnaires about listening before and after the task, and their comprehension test results were analysed. Although several findings emerged, perhaps the most significant was the problem learners had inferring overall meaning and speaker intention and understanding cultural referents and their significance (see Figure 1). This highlighted clear areas where learners could be helped with their listening skills which were, surprisingly perhaps, not exclusively linguistic and went far beyond the type of practice and development provided by course books.

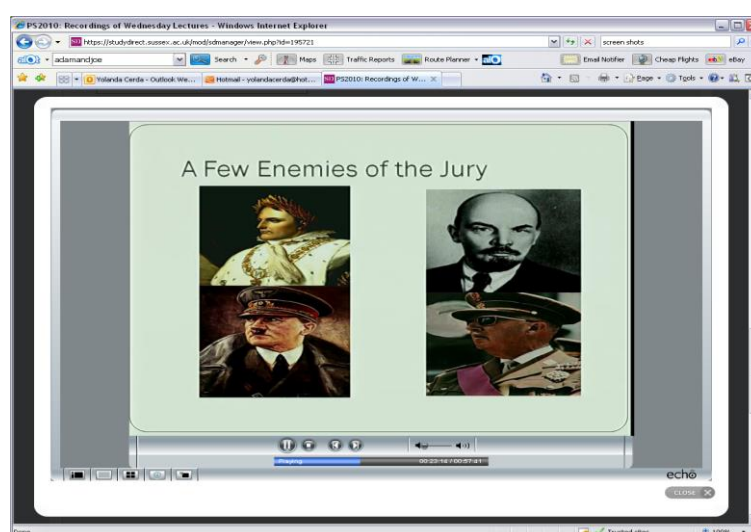


Figure 1: Reasons in favour of jury: cultural referents (Screenshot of slide from lecture on Jury Service)

Finally, workshop participants were encouraged to produce their own deep end tasks. We concluded that apart from its obvious use as a diagnostic tool, deep end strategy is highly appropriate to balance the diet of mechanical and often atomistic language tasks often prescribed to low level EAP students. Deep end tasks involve the learners as whole people and prevent infantilising them by providing exposure to real and complex activities. They highlight individual needs that would otherwise be neglected; they can give learners confidence; and learning *from* the tasks as well as *for* them gives students and teachers essential insights for further language and skills development.

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